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THROWING AWAY OUR BIRTHRIGHT

BY WILLIAM ROSCOE THAYER

FIFTEEN or twenty years ago, Mr. Joseph Lee, of Boston, wrote in a Boston newspaper a brief fable which he called *Immigrants and Sparrows*. It began as follows: "The English sparrow seems to me typical of the sort of immigrant that gives rise to an immigration problem. Like the great mass of undesirable accessions to our population, from the first importation of slaves to the latest pipe-line immigration fostered by the foreign steamship companies and other financial interests, he was brought over here on the theory of the need of immigrant labor. It was thought that the native birds were incapable of dealing with the worms that were eating the elm trees, and the English sparrow was sent for because he represented the cheapest labor in sight applicable to that particular job. His coming very soon gave rise to the question whether the sparrows were not worse than the worms, to which William Travers made his famous reply: 'I d-dunno. N-n-never had the sparrows.' Certainly he has had the effect of driving out our native birds, at least from the Eastern cities in which, like similar importations, he has largely congregated. The individual sparrow who is brought over here may be happy, but it does not follow that the world's happiness is increased by his importation. His coming does not lessen congestion on the other side; there are as many sparrows in England now as there were when the immigration began, or as there would have been if it had never taken place. Misery in Europe is not

lessened by importing it to this country. It is merely presented with another continent to spread over. The net result of immigration of such a class is the substitution of a lower stratum of being for a higher one and the intrusting of the fortunes of our republic increasingly to the stratum thus substituted."

In the years which have intervened between the publication of Mr. Lee's parable and the present, I have seen no more pertinent illustration of the manner in which our American immigration system works. The record of the potato bug or Colorado beetle might also be cited, and the actual losses to crops which it has occasioned are too well known to require a detailed statement. But the examples of the harm done by the unwise introduction of both the English sparrow and of the potato bug have been multiplied a thousandfold by our reckless treatment of the immigration problem.

A momentary pause has come as a result of the Great War, and of the enactment of the temporary three per cent restrictive law, which expires, by limitation, on June 30 next; but in the course of a few months the question will press upon us with renewed insistence, and upon our decision of it the welfare of the country may depend for many years; and not merely the welfare, but the very preservation, of the United States as the nation which the founders planned and every patriotic and intelligent citizen since then has wished it to be. Even during this pause immigrants are entering this country at the rate of several hundreds a day. The number has varied; at the maximum flow it averaged 1,000 immigrants a day. Does anyone know of any counteracting agencies here which can convert the most unpromising new aliens into Americans at that rate? This ratio would not affect the millions already here and not yet Americanized. Numbers do not make a nation strong. Only the character of its people can make it strong. Is it not time that we should abandon the delusion, which rejoiced but misled our fathers, that our principles were so beautiful and sound and just that even the untutored savage would adopt and practise them merely on knowing them? Principles cannot be improvised; they cannot be crammed as a boy is for his examination; they are the slow and steady fruit of trees that have had a long growth.

When the United States Government was formed under Washington, in 1789, its thirteen original States, although sprung from various strains of mostly Anglo-Saxon stock, and although jealously tenacious of their local rights and traditions, were nevertheless strongly united by the bonds of a common language and common ideals. And as the young nation grew, these things which they had in common strengthened their unity. The native Americans of that first generation realized that a continent of unlimited resources stretched to the west of them, but they needed, to develop their Eldorado, more man-power. Washington himself did not believe in throwing open the gates to everybody, but in selecting so as to secure only the best. As our possibilities became understood in Europe, the stream of immigration began to pour across the Atlantic. Vigorous men, alert men, adventurous even, sold their possessions in the old country and faced fortune in the new. Then the marvelous development of inventions redoubled the work of those already here and caused the need for more. Before the year 1850, the United States as far west as the Mississippi was staked out, if not actually settled, and the rapid extension of railways filled in the bare regions and joined the chief cities.

The need of soldiers in the Civil War slightly stimulated immigration in some sections, while in others it fell off. The pay the new-comers received was small, but large enough to allure men who could earn only the lowest wages in Western Europe. We must remember that roughly from this time on—taking the year 1870 as the point of departure—the immigrant came from a less and less desirable class. In the earlier years, the fact that a man was an immigrant presupposed that he had initiative, resolution, and other virtues which made him a desirable accession to a new country. But later the immigrants came less from Western Europe, and more from Southeastern Europe and Asia and were drawn from the least desirable strata of population. They had not succeeded at home, but they hoped that by some stroke of fortune they might succeed in the United States.

And now there entered another factor which tended to increase enormously the volume of immigration and to debase its quality. This factor was the steamship companies, which had no interest

in the kind of immigrants they brought over, but only in their number. In the course of a generation these companies transported cargoes of immigrants who numbered millions in the aggregate, and who could not be blamed if they were utterly ignorant of American ideals. Steamship companies combed Italy and Southeastern Europe for passengers. Stories of the sudden and wonderful enriching of the immigrants after a few months in America, were circulated with great effect. Posters were exhibited in remote Sicilian or Calabrian villages in which a ragged peasant might be seen embarking on the steamer at Naples, and, next year, driving down Fifth Avenue, New York, in his own limousine with a huge solitaire stud blazing on his shirtfront. Now undoubtedly many of the immigrants bettered themselves and the children and grandchildren of some of them are financially on a higher level than their relatives who did not come over. But what of America?

The prosperity of America is, and should be, the first consideration, but only recently have Congress and other official bodies which ought to guard the public health—and I mean not only physical health, but moral, intellectual and spiritual—paid attention to this work. "Big Business" proved as careless of higher issues as did the steamship companies. Not high minds or souls but "hands" were needed to construct a subway tunnel or a railroad, and "Big Business" contracted for them wherever they could be found and without inquiring into their fitness in any capacity except that of "hands". But we found that even "hands" can exercise an unexpected influence on the communities where they are thrown. There were Socialists among them, and Anarchists, and all sorts of cranks. More ominous was the fact that many of them, coming from countries in which ideals very different from ours flourished, wished to spread and perpetuate those ideals. They naturally thought that our ways and principles and aims were wrong and bad. It was much easier to smash ours and to go on with theirs. This need not surprise us. In Russia, where Bolshevik and Soviet doctrines have run riot for three years, thirty million Russians have died, mostly of starvation. Here is a strange contradiction! A system by which, the Bolsheviks preach wealth can be acquired, is precisely the system

which destroys not only wealth but the inhabitants also. And so would it be, if any of these mad doctrines were able to get the upper hand in the United States.

Our immigration laws attempt to prevent the coming to our shores of all avowed Anarchists, criminals and other subversive elements. But with the best will in the world, and after taking what seemed to be extreme precautions, they have not succeeded in excluding these undesirables, nor will they ever do so until psychologists discover some means of finding out what a man is thinking and planning, while he refuses to speak or write his intentions. One must see how inadequate any hurried inspection, the best which can be afforded under present conditions by the Immigrant Bureau, must be for protecting the people of America from the swarms that pour in to mingle with it. What alienist would pretend in private practice that he could diagnose the insanity of a patient in a minute's inspection? Many forms of mental disease are very elusive or slow in manifesting themselves. And yet, if the inspector fails to discover the germs or the disease in some immigrant who hurries by, becomes a resident, marries and has a family, the immigrant may propagate insanity which would run through generations. This is no imaginary evil. The record of the Jukes family is too hideously plain. The tribe of Jukes continued for generations.

Doubtless more care is taken now than used to be taken to shut out immigrants whom insanity or loathsome contagious diseases would render a danger to our population. But any inspection which is limited to a minute or less for each case cannot be thorough. Indeed, it must seem a mockery to everyone who realizes how much is at stake. To make our inspection worthy of this great country and adequate to the need of safeguarding the health of the 110,000,000 persons here, is something that should be insisted on. One obvious means of securing proper examination would be to have the prospective emigrants examined by an American official at the American Consulate abroad from which the emigrant expects to sail. Then, if for any reason he is found unfit and denied a passport, he cannot make the voyage over here and either be turned back or succeed in sneaking his way past our immigration authorities. I remember sailing a

dozen years ago from a southern Mediterranean port. In the stateroom next to that occupied by my wife was placed an emigrant said to be sick, but after a few hours on the water he came to, and proved to be a homicidal maniac who tried to break out of his cabin and kept up shrieks and violence. When we neared Gibraltar, the poor maniac was drugged and was let over the side of the ship, half-naked as he had torn off most of his clothes, and was taken ashore. Had he been examined by an American official doctor at the Consulate he would not have been permitted to sail. It was notorious a few years ago that a certain European Government made a business of shipping its imbeciles and incompetents to the United States, choosing points of entrance where it found access easy. Assuming that now the personnel of the Immigration Bureau is perfect, and that there are no dishonest officials who connive at smuggling in improper aliens, I repeat that with the small force employed it is impossible to consider our inspection of immigrants as adequate.

We must not forget that our inspectors are obliged constantly to circumvent the attempts of friends of immigrants, who, for whatever reason, work for their admittance. Immigrants, who have come over here and taken root, naturally send for their families and friends to join them, and every deceit is practised, if they have defects which would disqualify them, to run them past the inspectors' scrutiny. A striking example of this occurred six or eight years ago when a man, who had succeeded in getting by the inspectors, sent for his family. When they arrived at the American port, the inspector discovered that they all had a loathsome disease. One of the boys was already blind and could not walk down the gang-plank to the wharf without falling down. They were all obviously disqualified from entering the country, and were condemned to deportation. But someone who belonged to their race created a great stir and the newspapers abetted him and tried to rouse the American people against the terrible cruelty of separating a husband from his wife, and a father from his children.

In dealing with immigrants, we must never forget that blood with them is thicker than water, and often determines their actions without respect to justice, or law, or even common sense. A few

months ago a Sinn Fein emissary came over as a stowaway, and the Sinn Feiners hailed the fact as an act of heroism and as a proof of great adroitness. For some reason which was not explained, he was not deported at once, he remained here unmolested as long as he chose, and for all I know may be lingering here still. Examples of this kind simply prove that many naturalized Americans care more for some other country than for the United States. This fact explains, but can never excuse, many of the evils that have sprung from dishonest immigration.

I have mentioned some of these considerations because they belong in any discussion of immigration. At the present moment, when the inrush of foreigners is temporarily checked, it behooves us to weigh the entire problem most seriously, so that we may be able to discover and formulate an immigration law which shall be informed by experience and adapted so far as we can foresee to the needs of the future.

Take first what is commonly called the "practical" side. Do we need more immigrants? To-day there are said to be nearly 3,000,000 persons out of work in the United States. Does any one pretend that we can go on being regarded as a sane people, if we add by immigration a million a year to the number of unemployed? The fact that we do not need new contingents of working men at present ought to make it much easier to establish a rational immigration system. What we need is that the laborers already here should *labor* and give an honest day's work for an honest day's pay.

As we are not seeking employees, we can fix the terms on which immigrants will be admitted to the country. Foremost among these terms is the consideration of health. We must agree to no provision so elastic that immigrants who may be a source of disease or a charge on the public may worm their way in. Danger from this quarter was never greater.

A few months ago, the former Commissioner, Mr. Wallis, stated before the Senate Immigration Committee that "Eastern Europe is in the grip of four epidemics—typhus, typhoid, dysentery and tuberculosis." It is from those countries that great caravans of miserable human beings are winding their slow march westward in the hope of reaching ports from which they can be taken

to the United States. In Russia, since the Bolshevik *régime* came into power four years ago, perhaps thirty million persons have died of starvation, massacre and hardships. The bodies of many of the victims of these horrors often lay for a long time unburied, thus increasing the sources of pestilence. Even in other parts of Europe, which escaped the worst suffering, the health of many of the survivors has been undermined. From two million to ten million Germans are said to be waiting to emigrate to the United States as soon as they can find passage. Numerically, no single invasion of the ancient Barbarians into the Roman world could compare with this. Why should the United States accept the handicap of inferior candidates of whatever race for American citizenship? Why should it willingly assume the post of lazaret of the world? In ordinary life, if a child has scarlet fever, or diphtheria, or smallpox, it is carefully isolated for its own good, and for the good of any who might run the risk of infection by it. By what argument, either moral or medical, therefore, should the United States assume the responsibility of caring for the suffering, and curing, if it can, the derelicts and diseased of Europe and of Asia?

American sentimentalists, who have been from the start very serious obstacles to any rational solution of the immigration problem, will assuredly cry out: "If the peoples of devastated Europe need a refuge, we must take them in, no matter whether they have typhus or any other disease, however repellent, and however destructive of the community. Our duty is to succor to-day those who are in distress, no matter what the future may require."

To the appeals of sentimentalism such as this I have seen no answer more rational and cogent than that of Professor Robert DeC. Ward, one of the most far-sighted experts on immigration whom I know of. He says:

The indiscriminate kindness which we may seem to be able to show to the coming millions of European or Asiatic immigrants can in no conceivable way counterbalance the harm that these people may do to our race, especially if large numbers of them are mentally and physically unfit. Indiscriminate hospitality to immigrants is a supremely short-sighted, selfish, ungenerous, un-American policy. It may give some of us, for the moment, a comfortable feeling that we are providing a "refuge for the oppressed". But that is as narrow a state of mind as that which indiscriminately gives alms to any person on the

street who asks for money. Such "charity" may, truly, produce a warm feeling of personal generosity in the giver himself. But almsgiving of this sort does more harm than good. It is likely to pauperize him who receives, and it inevitably increases the burden of pauperism which future generations will have to bear. . . . Our policy of admitting freely practically all who have wished to come, and of encouraging them in every possible way to come, has not only tremendously complicated all our own national problems but has not helped the introduction of political, social, economic and educational reforms abroad. Indeed, it has rather delayed the progress of these very movements in which we, as Americans, are so vitally interested. Had the millions of immigrants who have come to us within the last quarter-century remained at home, they would have insisted on the introduction of reforms in their own countries which have been delayed, decade after decade, because the discontent of Europe found a safety-valve by flying to America. . . . Our duty as Americans, interested in the world-wide progress of education, of religious liberty, of democratic institutions, is to do everything in our power to preserve our own institutions intact, and at the same time to help the discontented millions of Europe and of Asia to stay in their own countries; to shoulder their own responsibilities; to work out there, for themselves, what our own forefathers worked out here, for us and for our children.

It is evident that in order to meet our national needs Congress must prepare an immigration law providing greater restriction and a more rational plan. The present law, for instance, bases the admission of immigrants upon percentages, each race or nationality being entitled to a certain proportion of the total number of persons belonging to that nationality already in the United States. One obvious defect in this rule is that it does not cover the total number of *naturalized* members of the given nationality.

All attempts to distribute immigrants according to certain localities have thus far failed. It was supposed, for instance, that peasants from agricultural districts would prefer to settle in agricultural districts here, but they did not. Nearly twenty years ago Baron Mayor des Planches, the open-minded Italian Ambassador to this country, hoped that by planting colonies of Italians in some of our Southern States, he might find conditions which would be favorable to the colonists, who might even, in some districts, replace the negroes; but the facts contradicted his benevolent dream.

One further element of the problem should never be lost sight

of: that is, the assimilability of the races from which immigrants spring. This can never be determined by theory. We thought for a long time that one class of our immigrants were most desirable, because they seemed most easy of assimilation. The recent war undeceived us. It showed us that we had millions in the United States who had never been affected or modified by what we regard as essential Anglo-Saxon ideals of Liberty and Democracy.

The immigration problem can never be settled wisely and justly unless it be settled by those who have a vision of what the United States stands for. The United States will cease to be the land of opportunity unless we preserve unsullied and undiminished the ideals by which, and on which, this Republic was created. The foreigner who hopes by plotting to win advantage for his creed over here, though he were twenty times naturalized, would remain a foreigner. He who seeks to involve the American States in the political or religious quarrels of the country from which he came is no American; he is a traitor of the baser sort. That citizen who would use his country for his private gain deserves to be uncitizenized. No true American will consent to the admission to our country of foreigners who will lower its standard in health, in morals, in intelligence, or in patriotism. Until we realize that we have inherited a sacred trust and that we must preserve it sacredly, we too are but imperfect Americans.

WILLIAM ROSCOE THAYER.